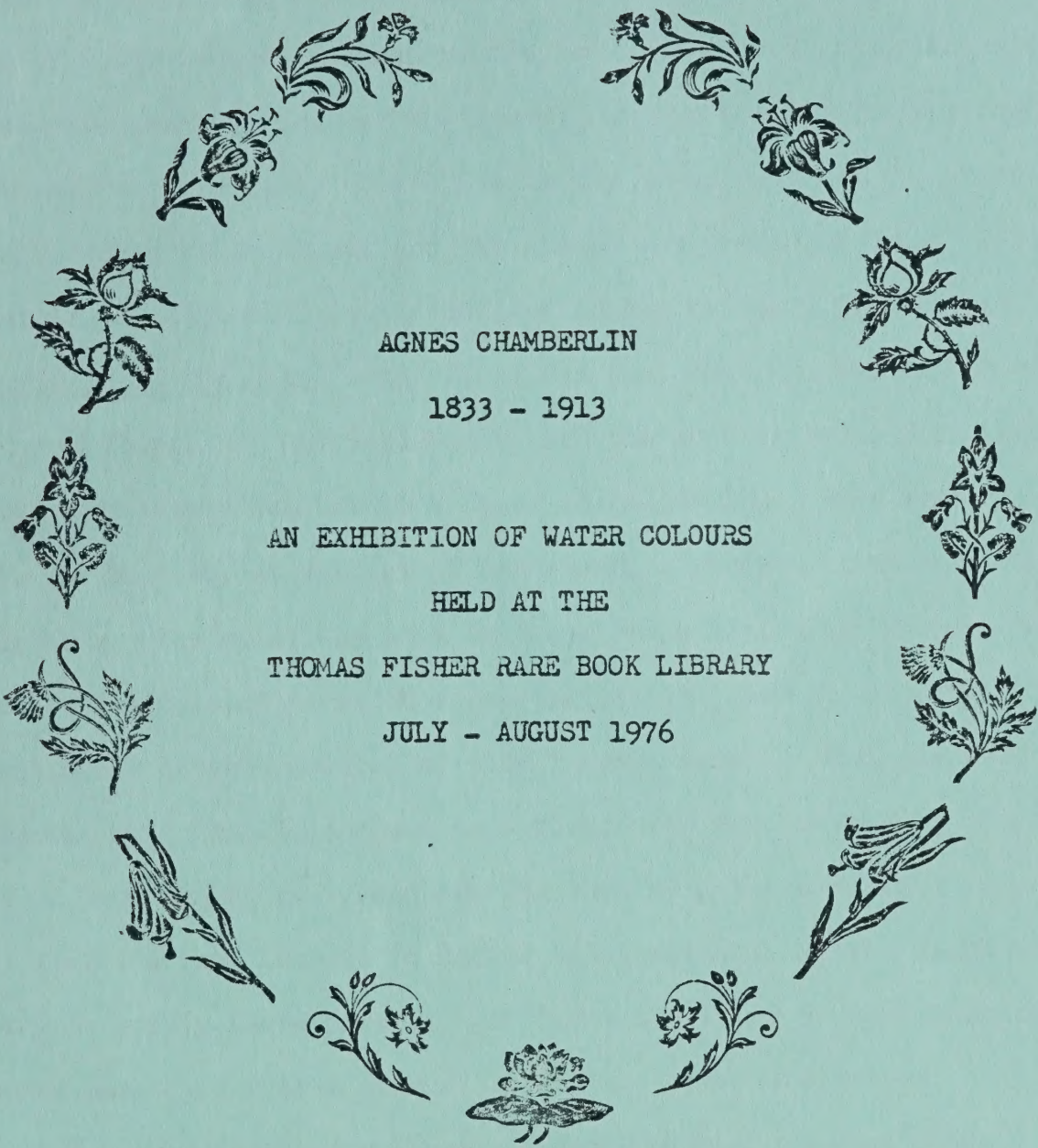




AGNES CHAMBERLIN

1833 - 1913

AN EXHIBITION OF WATER COLOURS

HELD AT THE

THOMAS FISHER RARE BOOK LIBRARY

JULY - AUGUST 1976

Agnes Chamberlin was born on a small farm on the outskirts of Cobourg, Ontario in 1833. She was the daughter of a celebrated literary gentlewoman of Upper Canada, Susanna Moodie, who had arrived in Canada with her husband the previous year as a somewhat reluctant emigrant from England. A few months after Agnes' birth the family moved to a remote, uncleared farm in Peterborough County and the scenes and events of Agnes' early childhood were later vividly described in her mother's famous book, Roughing it in the Bush. When Agnes was six, however, her father was appointed Sheriff of Hastings County and the Moodies moved from their farm to the comparative comfort of a house in Belleville. Here Agnes lived until she married, at the age of seventeen, a Toronto barrister, Charles Fitzgibbon. She spent the next thirteen years living in Toronto, busy with the domestic concerns of a growing family. Her first attempt to paint botannically correct studies of wild flowers came in 1863, when her aunt, Catherine Parr Traill, arrived in Toronto with the manuscript of a projected book on Canadian flora. Upon hearing that no publisher would consider Mrs. Traill's book because it lacked illustrations, Agnes Fitzgibbon decided to try to supply these herself. At first she tried to copy drawings of flowers made by a friend of Mrs. Traill's. Later she wrote:

I had never painted a flower, but the attempt to copy these drawings led to the discovery that I could sketch more accurately from Nature; and although Mrs. Traill's book was not then published, I continued to make drawings of all the wild flowers I gathered, with the assistance of friends, on the Humber plains and in the woods about my home on the Dundas Road.

In 1865 Mr. Fitzgibbon died, leaving Agnes a widow with six children to provide for on very limited means. In some desperation she turned her

thoughts to the possibility of illustrating and publishing a part of her aunt's work. She chose descriptions of thirty flowers from Mrs. Traill's manuscript and painted ten groups of flowers to illustrate them. Having secured five hundred subscribers for the work, she then found there was no lithographer in Toronto who was willing to undertake the printing.

All said it could not be done in Canada. I had promised my subscribers that it should be entirely a Canadian production, therefore decided that if no one else could, I must endeavour to do it myself.

I borrowed a small lithographic stone from the late Mr. Ellis, and drew a Trillium on it. Receiving encouraging commendations from him, I ventured to go on with the work.

The first edition of five hundred copies was printed, from my drawings on the stones, by the late Mr. Fuller, who was then the managing director for Messrs. Chewett & Co.

Printed, they had then to be coloured, and, again having to depend upon my own efforts, I set to work, and, with the help of two or three young friends, coloured the whole edition by hand.

In 1868 the work was published by John Lovell of Montreal, with ten handcoloured full page plates. Agnes Fitzgibbon was sufficiently encouraged by its reception to arrange for a second subscribed edition to appear in the following year. A third appeared soon after, and in 1895, Agnes, now Mrs. Chamberlin (having married Colonel Brown Chamberlin of Montreal in 1870) brought out a fourth edition. In the preface to this edition she described her earlier publishing experiences, as quoted above, and modestly summarized her achievement as imperfect but at least truly Canadian.

The work^s has many faults, of which no one is more conscious than myself, but both in drawing and colouring, the flowers are accurate representations of those gathered by myself and friends, and the book should be interesting as the first attempt in Canada to produce a work of the kind, and by an amateur who had never seen a lithographic stone till she commenced the work.

The book is, in fact, a land mark in Canadian printing and publishing -- the



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<https://archive.org/details/agneschamberlin100mart>

first "coffee table" book, lavishly illustrated in colour, to be printed and published entirely in Canada.

In 1885 Catherine Parr Traill's complete manuscript on Canadian flora was at last published, under the title Studies of Plant Life in Canada; or Gleanings from Forest, Lake and Plain, with nine full page colour illustrations by Agnes Chamberlin. A second edition published in 1906 contained an additional twelve half tone reproductions.

In addition to painting over two hundred studies of wild flowers, Agnes Chamberlin also produced a series of seventy-three studies of fungi, four of which were published in a report on edible fungi issued by the Geological Survey. Despite her hope that her paintings might be used in the future to illustrate a more comprehensive work on "the flora of our great Dominion", comparatively few of the watercolours have ever been published.

During her life time several major exhibitions of her paintings were held in the United States and England, as well as in Canada. After her death in 1913, her work remained largely unknown and unseen until, in 1934, her heirs presented the paintings to the Botany Department at the University of Toronto. In 1966 the collection, comprising over three hundred watercolours and sketches, was transferred to the Rare Books and Special Collections Department of the University of Toronto Library where selections of her paintings have been displayed several times. Although "botannically correct in outline and colouring", as Agnes Chamberlin claims in her 1898 introduction, the delicate watercolours now have an additional nostalgic appeal, evocative of a vanished Victorian era. Eleven of them appeared in print for the first time in 1972 in a work by Eustella Langdon, entitled

Pioneer Gardens. Yet Agnes Chamberlin's aim in painting these studies, like her aunt's in compiling her botanical observations, foreshadows the concerns of twentieth century conservationists. Both hoped in their joint work "to foster a love for the native plants of Canada, and turn ... attention to the floral beauty that is destined sooner or later to be swept away, as the onward march of civilization clears away the primeval forest, reclaims the swamps and bogs, and turns the waste places into a fruitful field."

Katharine Martyn
Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

